

# **PUBLIC EDUCATION WORKS:** Five lessons from low-and middle-income countries

*The analysis of case studies in various parts of the world shows that public education, managed and delivered publicly and in the public interest, is the most effective way to build just, inclusive, and sustainable societies, and to meet SDG 4 and human rights commitments.*

*Using locally relevant practices, strong public education systems are possible in all contexts, including in constrained settings.*

*As a result, public spending and policy efforts, both from governments acting domestically and from donor States and international organisations, must be focused on building strong and free public education systems, and should not be diverted to the private sector, in particular through public-private partnerships. This approach is particularly relevant to build transformative education systems during and after COVID-19.*

## **PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEMS FOR A CHANGING WORLD**

Public education is often critiqued as ineffective and inefficient. However, where shortcomings in public education are identified, they can often be attributed not to lack of capacity, but lack of political will. Reviewing seven examples of public education in developing countries, this research shows that, in direct contrast to widely disseminated ideas, public education can be the most effective, efficient, and transformative approach to education, and, crucially, it is possible to develop quality public education everywhere.

This is an important finding, at a time when market-based and privatisation policies in education have been promoted for many years, with devastating impacts. COVID-19 has exposed the unsustainability and inefficacy of education privatisation, while inviting us to reimagine education governance. Whereas the crisis has shown the unsustainability of low-cost private schools, with many that have ceased operating and left students without schools, and of “high-tech” solutions promoted by private companies that have reinforced education inequalities, this brief offers solutions. It analyses examples of strong public education in very diverse

settings, from Namibia to Brazil, through Vietnam, which pave the way for a pragmatic and realistic transformation in education systems, that is possible everywhere, starting now.

The case studies included in this research are not exhaustive: examples of public schools providing a quality education and steering social transformation, often despite serious obstacles, exist in every country. Instead, these examples show that public school systems can be very successful. They outline five cross-cutting lessons learned that support strong public education systems, despite various limitations and challenges. They should offer inspiration to donors and implementing countries alike to renew their efforts for free public education, and move away from the policies of the last two decades focused on private involvement and partnerships, which have shown their failure.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Multiple education experts from academia and civil society have been consulted to identify successful examples of public education that are rights-aligned.

The examples were screened through documentary research and preliminary interviews, and seven examples were chosen: Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Namibia, and Vietnam, as well as the Landless

Movement in Brazil and Muskaan Project in India. Secondary pre-COVID-19 education data have been analysed in all cases. Finally, 13 civil society organisations and four academic researchers reviewed the case studies.

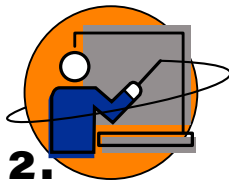
This brief summarizes longer case studies planned for publication in 2021.

## APPROACHES TO BUILDING QUALITY PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR ALL

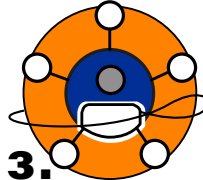
In different ways, the case studies illustrate the transformative potential of public education, showcasing a range of practices that promote quality and inclusion. While every context is specific, five cross-cutting lessons learned emerge:



**1.**  
EDUCATION HAS A LOCAL  
SOCIAL RELEVANCE



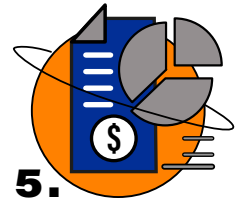
**2.**  
TEACHERS ARE ACTIVE  
PROFESSIONALS



**3.**  
ACCOUNTABILITY IS  
PARTICIPATORY



**4.**  
COMMUNITY IS  
ENGAGED



**5.**  
FINANCING IS  
ROBUST



**1**  
LESSON

### LOCALLY RELEVANT EDUCATION SYSTEMS MOTIVATED BY SOCIAL JUSTICE CAN DRIVE POWERFUL SOCIAL CHANGE

The approaches revealed in each case emerge from the local realities, needs, and cultural values, with education systems designed to address specific social contexts. Public education has an intimate relationship with society, being both a product of its context and a tool for social change. The local social purpose of education drives meaningful, acceptable, and adaptable learning, creating a shared commitment and propelling innovation, instead of defaulting detached conceptions of quality or standard content from school-chains, often irrelevant or harmful to local dynamics. At the same time, education is not solely responsible for such developments; it remains part of wider efforts and intersectoral and intersectional policies.

In **Ecuador and Bolivia**<sup>1</sup>, education seeks to create a new way of living and new approach to social development, valuing the knowledge of indigenous people and cultivating the Buen Vivir worldview.

In **Brazil**<sup>2</sup> and **India**<sup>3</sup>, historically excluded groups mobilise towards initiatives whose purpose is social inclusion and equality. Education aims to promote citizen engagement for ensuring rights, focusing on the most vulnerable and marginalised people.

**2**  
LESSON

**TEACHERS SERVE AS CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE WHEN VALUED, TRAINED, AND EMPOWERED IN BOTH SCHOOLS AND STRATEGY**

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In successful public education systems, teachers are treated as active and creative professionals, and are trained, supported, and empowered to play an active role in schools. They are central to education planning and to evaluate pedagogical processes. Professionalism is fostered as a reflexive practice and as a relationship of commitment embedded in communal and internal dialogues. This contrasts with approaches that position teachers as deliverers of content, dependent on standardised curricula and large-scale tests, or fast-track training solutions.

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In **Vietnam**<sup>4</sup>, teachers receive support from schools' principals, with a developmental form of accountability that promotes monitoring and cooperation between school stakeholders.

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In **Namibia**<sup>5</sup>, teachers had a central role in education reform, fundamental to enacting the aimed social changes of inclusion in a post-Apartheid society and towards a student-centred approach in schools.

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**3**  
LESSON

**PARTICIPATORY AND SUPPORTIVE ACCOUNTABILITY PROMOTES PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION QUALITY**

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Across the case studies, accountability is a participatory process that engages several stakeholders. It has a developmental approach, which advances teachers' professionalism and community engagement focused on improving education quality. Instead of relying on high stakes, test-based accountability, school leaders assess and assist teachers, who also evaluate and support each other, and parents offer and receive feedback, creating a loop of reciprocal accountability.

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In **Vietnam**, teachers receive feedback from peers, supervisors and parents, which is used for professional development.

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In **Cuba**<sup>6</sup>, test results are not made public. Instead, they are a tool for monitoring students' learning and for informing teachers' professional development.

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In the **Indian and Brazilian** projects, citizens learn about their rights and how to monitor policies and demand for social and educational rights.

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**4**  
LESSON

**ENGAGED COMMUNITIES  
ENHANCE THE QUALITY  
OF EDUCATION**

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Community engagement occurs in different forms in the seven examples examined, but always as an active and relevant part of an ecosystem that elevates the quality of education. Local communities are part of the creation of locally relevant solutions. In contrast to approaches that treat students, families, and communities as consumers of education with passive roles, stakeholders are active in these case studies. Democracy is not an abstract concept, but rather a concrete relationship and practice lived and experienced by stakeholders. As a by-product of such engagement and consequent improvement, some cases saw a reversal of education privatisation.

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**The Brazilian and Indian** initiatives include local engagement with policy and advocacy, in which parents, students and communities learn about and exercise their rights, actively diagnose issues, search for solutions, and interact with other stakeholders to promote change.

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In **Vietnam**, parents are part of the accountability system, helping teachers in reaching quality.

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In **Bolivia and India**, schools improved with local engagement and the perception of public schools also changed, leading to the return of some families from private to public schools.

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**5**  
LESSON

**SUSTAINED EDUCATION  
FINANCE DRIVES SOCIAL  
TRANSFORMATION THROUGH  
ENHANCED QUALITY  
AND INCLUSION**

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The elements for quality mentioned above require a sustained financial commitment by states - even in the context of constrained resources. The Education 2030 Framework for Action set two benchmarks: allocate at least 4% to 6% of GDP to education, and/or allocate at least 15% to 20% of public expenditure to education, a goal reached by many of the analysed cases. Most importantly, they illustrate a long-term commitment and a trajectory of increasing financing at the scale of each country's possibilities, even when not reaching OECD standards in absolute terms in the short term. Retrogression in commitment and funding can have devastating impacts and austerity is not an approach taken in these successful cases. Finally, the experiences show that communities should be engaged in monitoring and demanding adequate financing.

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**Cuba** has consistently spent more than 5% of GDP in education since 1994, and more than 10% since 2007.

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**Ecuador** has increased its expenditure in education from 1,15% of the GDP in 2000 to 5% in 2015, and 5% of public expenditure to 12,8% in the same period. Thus while remaining below the targets, the trajectory and constant increase in funding has been key to the country's educational progress.

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In the **Brazilian and Indian** cases, school communities mobilised to improve their local schools, which involved engaging with municipal authorities to ensure better financing.

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# RECOMMENDED ACTION

These five lessons provide examples of how public education systems can improve in a variety of contexts. While possible actions remain context-specific and may vary, collectively the cases demonstrate the possibility for effective and impactful action for change everywhere. The cases and lessons provide potential starting points and inspirations that governments may use to initiate improvements in their public education systems and to move away from some of the market-based strategies that have failed to serve children over the last few decades. For instance, governments may:

1. Embed education in local culture and development plans, creating relevance and motivation for education stakeholders;
2. Support teacher recruitment, training, and career development, so teachers become catalysts of change;
3. Frame or reframe accountability as a participatory practice that encourages transparency and professional development;
4. Create forums that assemble students, parents and teachers, and that enable public participation in policymaking to drive education quality;
5. Commit to sustainably and gradually increase funding for education, as a share of your national income (with a target of a minimum of 6% over a sustained period of time).

Engaging some or all of these recommendations will pave the way to strengthen free public and transformative education that is needed for a more inclusive and fair world for all.

This brief was produced collaboratively by working members of the Privatisation Education and Human Rights Consortium, an informal network of national, regional and global organisations and individuals who collaborate to analyse and respond to the challenges posed by the rapid growth of private actors in education from a human rights perspective and propose alternatives.



<sup>1</sup> Burgos, C.M.C. (2017). Transformaciones educativas en Ecuador y Bolivia (2005 - 2013): escenarios en disputa y nuevos sentidos para la educación (sumak kawsay / suma qamaña). PhD Thesis, UFMG. Retrieved Aug 30, 2020 from <https://repositorio.ufmg.br/handle/1843/BUOS-AQSFVL>

<sup>2</sup> Tarlau, R (2019). Occupying Schools, Occupying Land: How the Landless Workers Movement Transformed Brazilian Education. Oxford University Press. <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190870324.001.0001/oso-9780190870324>

<sup>3</sup> Actionaid. (2018). Muskaan: Schooling with a smile. The story of how the community helped ensure child friendly schools in Uttar Pradesh. Project report. <https://www.actionaidindia.org/publications/muskaan-schooling-with-a-smile/>

<sup>4</sup> McAleavy, T., Ha, T. T., & Fitzpatrick, R. (2018). Promising Practice: Government Schools in Vietnam. Education Development Trust. <https://www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com/our-research-and-issues/research/promising-practice-government-schools-in-vietnam>

<sup>5</sup> Dahlström, L (2002) Post-apartheid Teacher Education Reform in Namibia: The Struggle Between Common Sense and Good Sense. PhD Thesis, Umeå University. Retrieved Aug 30, 2020 from <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2%3A15738&dsid=6789>

<sup>6</sup> Carnoy, M. (2016). Four keys to Cuba's provision of high-quality public education. In. Adamson, F., Astrand, B., & Darling-Hammond, L. (Eds.). (2016). Global education reform: How privatization and public investment influence education outcome